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Lies My Comrades Told Me

My ex-comrades must be gratified that their anti-Zionist vitriol, a niche passion of the far left when I was young, are de rigueur for today's "progressives."

By Kathleen Hayes

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It began with a smart, skinny, good-natured guy with a Trotsky goatee, whom I met at UC Berkeley as I was protesting South African apartheid. It was 1985. I thought the Trotskyist group he belonged to was dogmatic and nuts, but that didn't stop me enjoying his company. By the following year I'd become his girlfriend and, in an overnight conversion that suggests I wasn't the independent-minded woman I thought I was, determined that the strident newspaper he sold was the brave bearer of essential truths.

I'm shocked and ashamed today to reread the articles that must have impressed me when I was 19, stupid, desperate for meaning and eager to please my boyfriend's comrades. The Zionist madmen threaten the Soviet Union with nuclear apocalypse, they screamed in a front-page article, and I became convinced of the urgent need to fight for socialism. They told me Natan Sharansky, who had just been released from the gulag and was going to speak in San Francisco, was a traitor who had spied on the Soviet workers' state, and I joined them in picketing that magnificent man. Soon after, I joined their youth organization and later their party, staying for over 25 years. During that time, I not only firmly believed I wasn't antisemitic: I thought I opposed antisemitism. But running through my belief system was the conviction that history had unfortunately put the Jews on the side of evil reaction, and the righteous must mobilize against their sovereign and ugly offspring, the State of Israel.

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Then the Soviet Union fell, and we found solace for our demoralization and grief in the rising struggle of the Palestinians. Communism is dead, we were relentlessly told, but the intifada lives. Sept. 11 and the war on terror ushered in forces hostile to our most basic vision of progress, and it required some mental gymnastics — which is to say, a steady erosion of truth — to justify our belief that the Islamic fundamentalists slaughtering people at Baghdadi neighborhood markets were on the side of progress, because at least

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machine.

The unchallengeable dogma on which so many of our lies were based — a tenet shared by countless left-minded people today — is that nothing is, and cannot possibly be, worse than U.S. imperialism. The doctrine cannot be shaken by any evidence. Once a person accepts that Western imperialism is the greatest possible evil, she must cheer any atrocity carried out by the neocolonial oppressed against it; or if she has any kind of conscience, lie about what her heroes actually do. A corollary of the doctrine is that tiny Israel is the U.S.' war-crazed puppet, if not the puppeteer. Antisemites have always used Jews to represent whatever it is they hate. So for today's anti-imperialists, Israel is the quintessence of imperialism, truth be damned.

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My former party's zeal for the Soviet Union was unfashionable in the 1980s left and sounds quirky today. But my ex-comrades must be gratified that their anti-Zionist vitriol, a niche passion of the far left when I was young, are de rigueur for today's "progressives." When college students and Hollywood stars rail that Israel is carrying out a genocide, Gaza is a concentration camp and Israelis are acting like Nazis, they're echoing the propaganda of my former party, which we in turn snapped up from the Soviet Union. I can find frenzied claims of a Zionist "Final Solution," "Holocaust" and "genocide" of the Palestinians, in the yellowing pages of my group's press many decades ago.

People ask: How can anyone believe such obvious lies, or deny the atrocities of Oct. 7? I'll wager that most don't believe a lot of what they're saying. They take the claims on faith, as I did, because they are made by people they respect, trust and even love. The first hesitant "I guess so" leads inexorably to accepting the next questionable "fact," because they've already invested too much emotionally to challenge their comrades or friends. Soon they're committed to defending a network of wild assertions about things they know nothing about. In an electrified region of their minds marked "Danger — Do Not Cross," they suspect the things they're saying may, in fact, not be true.

But adhering to truth is nowhere near as important as being loyal to their tribe — a beloved yet tyrannical community, which makes life a misery for those who fail to uphold the creed. Today's self-styled progressive is every bit as beholden to the party line as I, in my explicitly Leninist organization, was. This partly explains their rage:

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even more passionately those who make them feel guilty about it.

At some level they know they're spouting lies. This makes them hate even more passionately those who make them feel guilty about it.

One of the more sickening moments of my life was about five years ago, in my London apartment, when I realized that things I'd believed and fought for were ugly lies. At first I was naïve enough to think it was an honest mistake, which my intelligent, scrupulous comrades would rectify if I brought it to their attention. Instead they turned on me with the viciousness of an abused wounded pit bull, and when I still challenged them, my life fell rather dramatically apart. So I can't offer immediate assurances to anyone wondering whether to probe behind that electrified fence. There will be a price.

But I soon found support and belonging in a new community, among my own Jewish people, and forgiveness I often don't feel I deserve. I'm prone these days to second-, third- and fourth-guessing, but I'm confident about those things I do assert as true. I'm endlessly gratified about the open intellectual climate I've found on the other side, which contrasts so starkly to what I'm used to, and reflects the Jewish tradition of healthy skepticism and argument. There's freedom here — to question, to read unapproved books, to hear forbidden speakers, to think for yourself, to search for truth as you genuinely see it.

So to those who hesitate: Courage. You will suffer losses and pain, but soon you'll be asking, as I did, What took me so long? As Liel Leibovitz wrote in his essay "The Turn":

"The freedom you feel on the other side is so real it's physical, like emerging from a long stretch underwater and taking that first deep breath in the cool afternoon air. None of it makes the lost friends or the lost career opportunities any less painful; but there's no more potent source of renewable energy than liberty, and your capacity to reinvent—yourself, your group, your life — is greater than you realize."

Kathleen Hayes *is the author of "Antisemitism and the Left: A Memoir."*

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